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Virginia City

Ronald M. James

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Annalies Corbin
Rebecca Allen

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Secrets of a Western Past

Ronald M. James

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Set in Quadraat.

For Mom, Wilma B. James.
You introduced me to books before
I learned how to read,
and it made all the difference.

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Acknowledgments

Kelly Dixon, now on the faculty at the University of Montana at Missoula, excavated two of the sites discussed in this text. More importantly, Kelly and I discussed the writing of this sort of book for several years, and we contemplated coauthoring the project. Kelly was kind enough to kick around ideas and edit several of the first chapters, but ultimately coauthoring was not in the cards. Her contribution, however, cannot be understated, and she has my thanks.

Don Hardesty, long-standing professor in the anthropology department at the University of Nevada, Reno, and former president of the Society of Historic Archaeology, has inspired generations of students. His method, his insights, his dedicated hard work, and his kindness—he says "yes" more than anyone I know—has made him beloved by his students. He and I began working on Comstock projects in 1990, although his dealings with the mining district date to much earlier. For two decades we have tackled a variety of topics that have yielded diverse insights. This book is a memoir of twenty years of archaeology, but it consists of observations made while peering over Don's shoulder. He is the reason this work could be accomplished, and I thank him for all he did on these projects and for inspiring me since I first met him in 1973.

Another common thread to all these projects is the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior. Each of the projects described in this volume was supported by the Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the staff at the Cultural Resources Program of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. Other agencies, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute for Museums and Library Services, and the Nevada Foundation for Cultural Affairs, and individuals, including Karen Wells and Jim and Diane Linebaugh, provided financial support, but the National Park Service carried the weight for most of these projects.

Additional help came from students, volunteers, and local residents and agency staff. Besides Kelly Dixon other graduate students contrib-

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Introduction

Twenty-One Bits of Glass, Historical Archaeology, and the Meaning of the West

Simply put, archaeologists are storytellers. It is our responsibility to communicate to as wide an audience as possible the results and significance of our findings.
James Deetz

In 2000 twenty-one broken bits of 130-year-old glass began a journey that would bring them international attention, providing a glimpse into the past and offering an opportunity to underscore the importance of historical archaeology. Reed James, a fourteen-year-old volunteer and the son of the author, retrieved the bottom of a bottle during the excavation of Virginia City's Boston Saloon, an African American establishment operating at that location between 1866 and 1875. The colorless glass bore the imprint "Tabasco Pepper Sauce."[1]

When the bottom of the bottle emerged from the ground, it made the dig crew laugh. No doubt the fragment had different meanings for the dusty workers, but it is safe to say that finding evidence of the spicy condiment in the remains of a Wild West drinking establishment seemed somehow out of place. And besides, in Nevada's hot July sun, everyone was ready for a lighter moment. What no one understood at the time was that the artifact, buried since the early 1870s, had just taken a first step along a path where meaning would shift and new insights were possible.

The past has the power to enthrall people, and many find archaeology to be particularly enticing. The ability to touch history makes the connection with a former time all the more real. For collectors the petite Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle might be little more than a curiosity. For the archaeologists who have excavated in Nevada's Virginia City National Landmark District, artifacts like these have the power to serve as bridges to understand life in the nineteenth-century West. Too often, however, scientific analysis obscures the real strength of the discipline,

1. Stars on the embossed bottom of the Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle identified the imprint as the oldest known to the company. Drawing by the author.

which is its ability to bring the past alive, to make objects speak with voices long since silenced. The shattered Tabasco bottle illustrates the many different ways that remnants of the past can shed new meaning on those who once used and then discarded the objects around them.

The Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle underscores the fact that not all discoveries are understood clearly in the field. Kelly Dixon, then a graduate student, supervised archaeologists and volunteers as they spent over two years cleaning, cataloging, and analyzing the roughly thirty thousand artifacts from the Boston Saloon. It was not until the end of this process that one of her lab workers, Dan Urriola, realized that Reed had retrieved enough of the bottle for it to be reassembled. Bottle diggers would have discarded the twenty-one fragments in their rush to find intact treasure. It was good fortune that archaeologists had collected the artifacts, or there would have been no story to tell.

Urriola had successfully completed dozens of these intricate if not maddening three-dimensional puzzles, but the small bits of glass represented a particular problem. The veteran volunteer is quick to point out

2. Volunteer Dan Urriola reassembled the Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle from shattered remnants. Photograph by the author.

that pottery shards will "lock in place" when the joint is right, but glass fragments slide along the break, which makes gluing more of a challenge. Also the size of the finished project—roughly five inches tall—meant that the twenty-one pieces were small and delicate. Nevertheless, Urriola persevered, and it was finally possible to gaze at a Tabasco bottle from the early 1870s. Additional research was needed, however, to understand the significance of the object.

As a first step it is important for archaeologists to determine the age of an artifact. Fortunately, several scholars working in the fields of ar-

chaeology and history have invested considerable time documenting the development of the Tabasco Pepper Sauce Company and the evolution of its bottles. Edmund McIlhenny started selling his remarkable pepper sauce in 1868, after he founded the Louisiana business that remains in the family to this day.

In 2000 and 2001 archaeologists excavated the company's yard on Avery Island. With the help of historians, they created a sequence of bottles, with approximate dates for changes in form. Initially McIlhenny sold his product in plain cologne bottles with long necks and thin lips. Sometime in the late 1860s or early 1870s, he began producing his own bottles with the name of his company embossed on their bottoms. The oldest known form of imprint included two six-pointed stars, a feature soon discarded, perhaps because they made the bottle rock slightly when standing on a flat surface.[2]

Another peculiarity of these early containers was their sharp shoulders. Historians have concluded that this caused breakage during shipment. Within a few years McIlhenny changed his bottle to reduce damage in transit, giving it the round-shoulder profile well known today. The oldest bottle with the Tabasco Pepper Sauce imprint in the company's collection has a thick lip, apparently designed to hold a spout to allow the potent sauce to drizzle rather than pour: it is well known that a little Tabasco goes a long way.

The Virginia City discovery, however, had a thin lip similar to McIlhenny's original cologne bottles. The artifact from the Boston Saloon site subsequently gained the title "one of a kind," and it seemed to represent a missing link in the transition from the earliest generic bottles to those with the company's imprint. What had been a source of amusement in the field was now a noteworthy curiosity.

Significance can be a tricky thing to define and understand. The instant the bottle claimed the title of "world's oldest bottle with a Tabasco Pepper Sauce imprint," archaeologists considered it with new respect, but insights must yield more than the dating of an artifact. In this case it would be a challenge: archaeologists have a hard time attaching meaning to a single object.

Consider, for example, the thousands of spent cartridges that emerged from the Virginia City site of O'Brien and Costello's Shooting Gallery and Saloon dating to the 1870s and 1880s and operating sever-

al blocks from the Boston Saloon. The evidence of gunplay was clearly part of the business's story, and the artifacts provide an opportunity to understand the types of weapons used as well as the popularity of this institution, which encouraged drinking and the firing of pistols in a crowded place. A single spent bullet found at the Hibernia Brewery and Saloon—only one hundred yards away—is harder to understand. It is tempting to imagine it tumbling to the ground after some Hollywood-style shootout, but perhaps it merely fell from someone's pocket as he searched for two bits—twenty-five cents—to pay for a cigar and a beer. A single, isolated object can be intriguing, but it too often cannot speak to its own meaning.[3]

A cache of Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottles would have indicated the importation of the product to Virginia City just as the mining camp gained international recognition. The company's records do not address the early export of its new condiment to the West, so such a discovery would have added significantly to its own corporate history. But there are many ways a single bottle could have ended up broken in the trash pit behind a western African American saloon in the early 1870s. The most likely scenario is that someone carried the bottle from Louisiana to Virginia City.

After the Civil War many people, including southern African Americans, sought western opportunities. Perhaps a former slave exchanged the bottle for a meal and a beer. Maybe a businessman brought a number of the bottles, together with other products, which he was selling to restaurants and saloons. Although the records of the Tabasco Pepper Sauce Company are silent about western exports during the period, an individual peddler could have acted on his own to bring the culinary innovation to the Comstock Mining District.[4] The answer to these questions will probably remain elusive. Our fascination with the past often thrives most at the edge of the abyss. We stand on the solid ground of facts and peer into the shadows where motivations, thoughts, and attitudes are ill-defined, and imagination soars. Too often it is only possible to speculate.

There is, however, some significance in the single Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle that warrants consideration. The recovery of an isolated spent pistol cartridge is not surprising. They are ubiquitous. Evidence of the presence of Tabasco in a remote, early-1870s mining town—even in the form of a single bottle—is noteworthy. Today finding a twentieth-

century Tabasco bottle discarded on a beach in Tahiti would mean little. Finding one on the moon would demand attention. That the newly invented Tabasco Pepper Sauce made it to the recently created state of Nevada, 2,200 miles from Avery Island, Louisiana, speaks both to the emerging enthusiasm for the product and to the fact that the world was becoming a small place.

By 1868 Virginia City was a bustling, cosmopolitan community. It was an international model of how to build a mining town in a remote location that was nevertheless tied to the global marketplace. Connections with the rest of the world allowed local merchants to acquire anything its residents might desire. The transcontinental railroad—completed the same year that McIlhenny founded his Tabasco Pepper Sauce Company—had an explosive effect on commerce as products could be shipped long distances in a cost-effective way. The remote mining district became even closer to far-flung places.

In the 1870 census Nevada had more foreign-born residents per capita than any other state, and Virginia City was by far its largest community. The mining town was international, wealthy, and growing, possessing a voracious appetite for everything the world's marketplace had to offer. With that perspective in mind, it is not too surprising to find evidence of the innovative pepper sauce in the trash pit of a saloon. Astonishing or not, the bottle can be considered an expression of a growing network of commercial ties and an indication of how Virginia City residents relished the new and exciting while demanding products from everywhere.[5]

That having been said, the story need not end there. Fortunately, the science of archaeology can tease even more insight from artifacts. The Boston Saloon had several large ceramic pots that were eventually shattered and ended up as trash. One of the fragments of a lid was splattered with red stains. In the field Dixon and the other archaeologists thought it might be blood, and they imagined situations from the violent to the mundane to explain its presence. Eager to extract DNA that might reveal information about the person associated with the possible bloodstain, Dixon sent the artifact to a lab. It was quickly clear that the stain was not, in fact, blood. Meaning given by imagination can evaporate in a flash.

Analysis revealed that the red blotches were the remnants of a meal. Traces of amino acids and capsaicin indicate the presence of a cayenne-

based marinade used with meat. Again, meaning can be elusive, dancing on the line between knowledge and speculation. It is easy to imagine that this was a remnant of the cayenne-based Tabasco Pepper Sauce, but the stain does not allow for that leap. At least on some level it does not matter whether a bit of marinade can be tied to the bottle. It is sufficient to know that the kitchen at the African American business used this type of flavoring to prepare meals.[6]

Acquiring insights from broken bits of past lives is difficult and can easily be taken too far, but our yearning to understand people from another century demands that we search—or even speculate—about meaning on a fundamental level. What was it like to live in a former time? What universal conditions are shared by virtue of the common link of humanity? What differences would shock us because, even though we are removed by only a handful of generations, cultures change and common ground erodes with time?

The little Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle gained international coverage on television and in newspapers. The condiment is, after all, a very popular product. Millions had the chance to imagine what the artifact meant. The fact that people today could share enthusiasm for the sauce with customers in an African American saloon of the Wild West offered a connection with former lives. The title of "oldest" and the popularity of the name "Tabasco" inspired headlines, but a shared desire to connect with the past was the elusive factor that carried the story around the world.

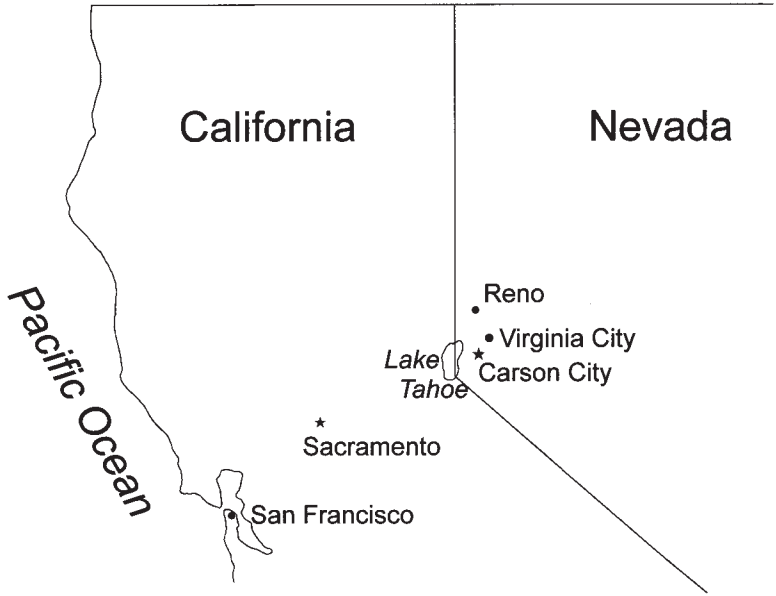
One aspect of the bottle and the meaning many likely ascribed to it hinged on the pepper sauce's current popularity and the fact that "Tabasco" is a household name. Ironically, this is something the twenty-first century does not share with the past. McIlhenny's sauce was still an emerging, largely unknown innovation in the early 1870s, when customers at the Boston Saloon consumed it. Most people who heard about the news in 2003 probably did not understand this.

Ultimately, it is not possible to define the way that the international array of twenty-first-century people perceived the bottle as they considered it for a few minutes. The transience of the moment and the different shades of ascribed significance are an unfathomable part of our common human inheritance. If we cannot really understand meaning today, understanding its counterpart in past times threatens to be hope-

less speculation. But that obstacle does not prevent us from engaging in the effort, from imagining how long-gone people considered themselves and the things around them. After we acknowledge the limits we confront when dealing with artifacts, there is a simple truth that must be acknowledged: archaeology is a powerful tool that brings life to complex past societies. Speculation is a potent tool that helps create enthusiasm and attract adherents and financial support.

Each of the thousands of artifacts that Dixon uncovered at the Boston Saloon site has a story to tell, although not all can speak with the power of the diminutive Tabasco Pepper Sauce bottle. Archaeologists who undertake the enormous effort to retrieve these remnants from excavations have an obligation to draw insights from every fragment of glass and rusted metal. The reaction to the news about the Tabasco bottle speaks loudly in its own right: people love to learn about the past and visualize its dimensions; they want to know what archaeologists have discovered and to understand what it means. The possibilities are only limited by imagination. If an archaeologist fails to hold an artifact up to the light, turn it in every possible way, and then reveal insights to the public, an opportunity is lost, because every headline seized and every excavation celebrated in the popular imagination strengthens the entire profession.

Virginia City



People regarded Virginia City as part of the Pacific Coast, located as it was within miles of the Sierra Nevada, but the community was remote enough to present many logistic challenges. Map by the author.